

Going Home

The chaplain was standing at the podium, speaking of beginnings and endings. Like it had all day, reality launched a sneak attack. The chaplain was talking about him. *It can't be me,* thought the Sailor. *Is this the end? I'm not done; I'm not ready to go! There was still so much more I wanted to do!*

As the chaplain droned on the Sailor's mind wandered. Behind the podium hung the garrison flag, or the "Patton flag" as most people thought of it. It was huge. He thought about that flag; it had always seemed bright, bold, even beautiful when he saw it standing in ranks. It always made him stand a little straighter, show a little more pride in his bearing. Now, up close, it seemed garish, worn, maybe a little tacky. Across the front of the ceremony stood flags from all fifty states. The rafters were festooned with a variety of signal pennants, chosen and arranged for aesthetics rather than any particular message. All the trappings of ceremony that the military was so enamored of, and so fitting for this occasion. Idly he glanced out over the divisions, standing in their formations, most looking eyes forward, betraying no emotions on their faces. A few of the younger men, still lacking in discipline, fidgeted a little. They could care less about saying good-bye to a shipmate they'd hardly known.

It hit him again. Like the Japanese diving on Pearl Harbor, the realization struck home that this was for him. All of this was for him. Soon enough the ceremony would be over, and he would be but a memory. Some would be glad to see him gone, some would mourn his leaving, and speak of him with the same nostalgia they would use for someone who had died.

Now it was the Skipper's turn. As he stood at the podium, the fidgeting in the ranks ceased. The Sailor wasn't surprised at that; instead, he allowed himself a slight smile. If the young pups in the ranks thought that the Skipper hadn't seen them and already marked them in

his mind, they were fooling themselves. The skipper started talking about the Sailor, saying the usual insincere things about how great he was, how much he would be missed. The Sailor had heard the same speech too many times over too many years to believe the Skipper really felt that way about any man in his command. Soon enough, the Sailor would be but a memory, a name on a report, to be filed away as part of history.

The Sailor began to pay a little closer attention; he would be next at the podium, and it behooved him to be ready. He thought about what he would say; should he have prepared a speech? He knew it made little difference what he said. This was his day, he could say what he wanted. No one would hear. Some envied him, some pitied him. All were ready to go have a cigarette, have a beer, get off their feet for awhile. Because of the retirement, the troops would have the rest of the day off, and they were eager for liberty to start.

He stood at the podium, his mouth dry and his palms wet. He thought for a minute and spoke. The first part was easy enough; thanks to the Skipper for his kind words, thanks to the men for coming. The last part was standard, but it struck as ironic now as it always had when he stood on the other side of the formation. The men in ranks had no choice. There was a ceremony, they were there. That thought settled it for him. *Keep it short*, he thought. *You know that will impress them more than anything you say*. He would be judged by the men based on all he didn't say. He took a deep breath and began to speak. He spoke of the camaraderie, the special relationship between those that chose to go to sea. He would miss that. He advised those assembled to enjoy it while they could, because life was short, and these days passed all too quickly. He spoke of some of the things he would miss: the travel, the places, the ports. The mornings he could steal out onto a sponson with a cup of coffee and watch the sun come up over a heaving sea. His voice faltered, and he caught himself quickly. That would not do, not in front

of the men. It was time to wrap things up, and he did. Another quick thank-you, and he turned to the Skipper. *Let's get this over with*, he thought.

The Skipper rose, and they stood in front of the podium, face to face. He knew what came next: salute the Skipper and ask to go ashore. Still, he hesitated. He knew it was too late, but part of him screamed inwardly, *I take it back! I'm not done! There's still so much more I want to do!*

The Skipper smiled, and the Sailor wondered if the man could read his thoughts. He drew himself erect, snapped a salute and said, "Request permission to go ashore, sir."

The Skipper returned the salute. "Permission granted." He held out his hand to the Sailor, and with a quick shake, said, "Good luck!"

The Sailor turned quickly, doing a smart about-face. He walked over to the red carpet, and returned the salute of the sideboys as he started down. The bosun blew his pipe, stretching out the notes to match the Sailor's stride. The final note cut off perfectly as he stepped to the end of the carpet. It was over. He was done.

Later was a small reception; it barely filled the Fleet Reserve Association's bar. Just a few of his close shipmates and family. The Skipper made an obligatory appearance, drank exactly one-half beer, and left. The Sailor worked on his third tequila on the rocks, then another, trying desperately to relax, to come to grips with the day's events. As he poured yet another, his brother Dan stepped up and clapped him on the back. "So, swabbie, are you finally ready for a normal life?"

Pompous ass, he thought. "Sure, I guess. Depends on your definition of normal, doesn't it?" Dan had never had much respect for his career choice. Not that he knew much about the Navy or the military in general. All he knew of the sea service was what he saw in old movies

like *Mr. Roberts* and reruns of *McHale's Navy*. Once he'd actually asked the Sailor what kind of trouble he'd gotten into. He seemed to think that no one joined the service unless it was a choice between that or jail. Either one was a sentence; you did your time as quick as you could, then you got out and never looked back. The Sailor took a long pull on his drink, his eyes searching for a distraction, a way out. He noticed the rest of the family starting to draw in closer. Not a good sign; he could tell something was in the wind.

Dan reached in his pocket and pulled out a key. The Sailor noticed that there were two keys on the ring, apparently door keys. The fob was one of those garish glow-in-the-dark jobs, this one shaped like the landlocked state he'd once escaped. "Here's a little something to ease the transition. It's a little place I bought as a rental some time ago. Why don't you take it, move in, get yourself settled?" The family smiled its approval.

Outflanked, dammit! "I can't accept this, it's too much. I'm sure I can find a place." That out-of-control feeling was building again. Lately it seemed more and more that life was moving quicker than he was. *Steady up*, he thought, *this is no time to freeze up like a new recruit facing his first admiral.*

"Nonsense. I've had that place for some time now, and it's more than paid for itself. And we all know that you've really not been able to put away much on your pay." The rest of the family nodded in approval.

You arrogant bastard! "I've hardly had a chance to consider where I want to settle, Dan. Maybe we could let this wait a few days? Give me a chance to consider my options?" he asked weakly. *A chance to find a way out, more like!*

Dan frowned, and the family frowned with him. "Surely you plan to come home? I mean, we've seen so very little of you all these past years. And now your days of roaming are

over, aren't they? Look, give it a chance. This way, there's no pressure to decide where you want to go and what you want to do with the rest of your life. And a little time at home will do you good. Why, there are all kinds of nieces and nephews you haven't ever met. And the folks are getting on in years. Surely you can spend a little time close to them, get reacquainted while you plan your future."

Yeah right, no pressure. The Sailor knew he was caught. His blood seemed to thud in his head, the first line of squalls that foretold of one bitch of a headache. This was little more than emotional blackmail, and he knew he'd pay the ransom. And he also knew that in paying that ransom, he would be trapped. Not for a year, not for two, but probably for the rest of his days.

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The house was small and neat. More than neat, it was squared away. A few pictures lined the walls, framed in plain black frames. The frames were lined up almost as if snapped to an invisible grid, in orderly rows. Many of the photos were of men in uniform: the Sailor's friends and shipmates. A few showed men in civilian clothes against exotic backgrounds: the ruins in Athens, a bay full of Chinese junks, the huge statue of Christ overlooking Rio de Janeiro. A few dishes stood drying in the rack, but no dirt showed in the sinks or on the counters. A coffee maker stood ready at one end of the counter, a mug sitting next to it. The interior of the mug was coated with a thick patina of coffee. Like most Sailors, he never washed it. A quick wipe for the outside, but never the inside. To wash the mug was to ruin the flavor of the coffee.

The coffee maker clicked on, and with a gurgle began to dribble the morning's offering into the carafe. No other sound broke the silence, yet in the bedroom the Sailor sat on the edge of his bed. It was 5:30, a half-hour before reveille, and he needed no alarm clock to start his day.

He grunted a greeting to Seadog, and padded to the bathroom. Seadog was a present from his sister. A mutt of indeterminate origins, Seadog was supposed to be a companion. The Sailor saw it as another means of tying him down. Still, the dog tolerated him, so he grudgingly tolerated the dog. In the month since moving here, they'd developed a relationship that was oddly more that of roommates than a pet and its master.

His morning ablutions finished, he walked into the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. He took a sip of the rich, dark brew, inhaling the fragrant steam. He made his coffee with a pinch of salt. While to most it may have tasted odd, to him it was familiar, and maybe a little comforting. As he breathed in the steam, he thought of other cups of coffee. The coffee aboard ship was always strong, very strong. It usually had a sheen from a film of diesel fuel on it, too. He remembered a shipmate, what was his name? *Sam*, he thought. Sam was always trying to light his coffee. One day he managed to do it, too.

He walked into the living room and frowned at the furniture. Like the house, it had been provided by his brother. It was comfortable, if a little worn. He thought of it as "early American flea market." Pretty generic stuff, really. Still, the appearance didn't bother him so much as the source. It was yet another debt he owed his brother; another debt he hadn't wanted in the first place.

He sighed and turned to walk out onto the front porch. Seadog followed him. The sun was sneaking up over the trees that bordered his neighborhood. He wished the trees gone. The sun had risen above the horizon 20 minutes ago, yet he couldn't see it. All he got was this artificial "second sunrise." The trees blocked the sun, filtered the light with their leaves. He longed for a proper sunrise, over a gunmetal sea, with the flaming ball reflected off the horizon.

A sun rising over the sea was a sun that spoke of the power that was inherently its own; nothing stood in its way, and few could stand to gaze at its brilliance for long.

He stood watching the light creep into the neighborhood. He was among the first up. The houses around him would remain lifeless for another hour or so. He savored the stillness of the morning, and the cool air added a little zest to his coffee.

Seadog finished his morning toilet, considerately depositing his waste at the far corner of the property, under a bush. The Sailor had been dismayed at first to find the dog leaving piles all over the yard. He'd taken to scooping each one up and tossing it under the same set of shrubs Seadog now used, patiently explaining to Seadog that his indiscriminate use of the yard as one large toilet just wasn't acceptable. A mutt he may have been, but Seadog soon figured out what was expected of him. Free to water any plant standing in the yard, he stepped well away from the house and under the bushes when he needed to take a dump.

He walked over and dropped at the Sailor's feet. Together they watched the town begin to wake up and start its day. The Sailor had little interest in the goings on of the town; it was the peace and quiet of the morning that brought him out. Of all the watches he had stood, he enjoyed the last watch of the day, the watch that overlapped night and morning. Overlooking ports that slumbered, the bustle of the ship still at its lowest ebb. This same sun seen rising over the minarets of Istanbul, or the peaks of Hong Kong. For him, it was the most relaxing part of the day.

Too soon the morning was shattered by the slamming of doors as the commuters started and revved their engines in preparation for the start of the daily rat race. What a way to make a living! Drones in never changing scenes, never breaking out of their little mazes. He sighed,

and rose to go back in the house. As the morning filled with the sounds of suburbia, he headed off to fix his solitary breakfast.

He opened the fridge, and from the neat ranks inside pulled a carton of eggs and a package of bacon. He debated briefly about making biscuits, then passed it off as too much trouble. He was in no hurry to start the day, he just wasn't up to the mess it would make. As he started the bacon, the phone rang.

"Hey, asshole, what's up?" a familiar voice cried.

The Sailor grinned. "Billy! Damn, it'd good to hear your voice! What's going on?"

"Same shit, different day buddy. How's by you?" Billy answered. "I hadn't heard from you since you moved back to the prairie, thought I'd see how retirement was treating you."

The Sailor frowned. "Frankly, Billy, it sucks. I wish I'd never retired."

"Yeah, but they gave you little choice, shipmate. You got your twenty; time to make room for someone else. Besides, aren't you living the good life now? Nothing to do but relax and take life easy, right? I mean how bad can it be?"

"I can't take this anymore, Billy, I really can't. You'd have to see it to believe it. Nothing but cornfields, bean fields and cows. These people think a sailor is someone who owns an 18 foot jon boat with a trolling motor on the front."

"Shipmate, I don't know why you ever moved back there in the first place," Billy responded. "I always figured you to stay out here. For crying out loud, you're what, 500 miles from the nearest ocean?"

"Yeah, something like that. Too damn far. My lungs are used to salt air, and all I breathe here is dust."

"So what are you going to do? You're not going to stay there, are you?" asked Billy.

“I don’t know how to get out of staying. Listen, you don’t know what it’s like having family and expectations. Family is quicksand with a welcome mat.”

“Buddy, listen, you gotta get out of there. I have a friend down on the Gulf Coast. He’s got a shrimp boat, and he’s always looking for a good hand. He shrimps some, makes some runs down to the islands; it’s gotta be better than any gig you could scare up around there.”

The Sailor sighed. “Man, I just don’t know. They all think that’s supposed to be behind me now. I saw an ad for a guy down in the Keys, he was looking for someone to crew a boat he was taking from Key West to the Virgin Islands. So I mentioned something to my brother, like maybe I would be interested in doing this. Nothing long term, just a few days on the ocean and then I’d fly back. It was like I said I wanted to run away and join the circus, for crissakes. My own brother, lecturing me about ‘growing up, taking responsibility.’ My family is a bunch of hillbillies; they just don’t get it. To them the sea is something to use as a background for a vacation photo. I think they believe they’d melt if salt water actually touched their skin.”

“Ok, well, do what you got to do,” Billy said. “Still, think about it. My buddy is always looking for crew, and I think you’d be better off down there. Listen, I gotta get off of here; there’s some things I need to do before the morning.”

“Shipping out tomorrow?” the Sailor asked.

“Yeah. Hey, drop me a line, ok? And think about heading for the coast, before you dry up and wither away, ok?”

“Yeah, right, I will. Have fun, ya lucky bastard.”

The Sailor hung up, more than a little depressed. Shipping out! The lucky SOB was on his way to Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, or some other such place. Anywhere but here. No sense dwelling on it, he thought. He turned to finish cooking his breakfast.

Breaking his eggs into the skillet, he thought of Kenya as he watched them fry. Now that was one place he'd rather not visit again. He thought of the hotel he'd stayed in. A five star hotel, and they couldn't drink the water. The officer in charge of the small Navy detachment had required them all to take a case of bottled water back to the hotel, advising them to drink with it, and brush their teeth with it. He could picture the place in his mind. As he tried, the image that came was of the cook who did his breakfast the next day.

It was a breakfast buffet, with potatoes, rolls, sausages and bacon. What he saw though, what fascinated him still was the young man that had cooked his eggs. The man was an artist. He'd stepped up, placed his order for a pair over easy. The cook had picked up a fry pan that looked well-used, splashed a little oil in it and quickly, almost like a magician performing a trick, had cracked the eggs one-handed, dropping them into the hot oil. He shook the pan, keeping the eggs moving. As soon as the whites had set, he did this neat little wrist flip. The eggs had sailed to edge of the pan, and just as the Sailor thought they were coming out, they neatly looped up over the curve of the skillet and laid themselves over. He'd been so impressed he'd almost ordered more eggs just to watch the procedure.

He shook his head to clear the image, and picked up a spatula. He tried flipping his eggs like that himself a few times, making a mess and losing his eggs every time. He flipped his eggs, and let them cook for just a few seconds before sliding them onto a plate. He wasted no time in finishing breakfast; another habit from the Navy he couldn't break. In those days he never had enough time to savor a meal; now it seemed he didn't know how.

He fed the last two pieces of bacon to Seadog, picked up the dishes. In no time at all he had the kitchen back ship-shape, and he called to the dog to join him for the morning trip to the post office. They stepped out of the house, and headed down the street.

Mail was something that was finally becoming routine. It no longer held the anticipatory excitement that had preceded mail call aboard ship. Now, most of his mail consisted of junk; flyers and papers addressed to "Occupant." Even mail was better at sea. Reminding Seadog he needed to stay outside and wait, the Sailor stepped into the post office and checked his box. A life insurance circular and a sale paper for the grocery. He tipped them into the trash on the way out, and headed down the street with Seadog.

It was happening again; that queer sensation that time was folding over on itself, bending itself until "now" overlapped with "then." Little things set it off; this time it was a mere whiff of diesel exhaust and the rumbling of the bus motor. Though his eyes saw the same Midwestern town he knew he was in, his mind was walking the streets of Singapore. The breeze wafted past his face and though it couldn't be possible, it carried a tang of salt. He half turned his head, thinking he could smell the sandalwood incense of the shrines that seemed requisite in every little shop in Singapore. Stumbling slightly, he shook his head to clear the past.

Continuing down the sidewalk, he watched a couple of children at play. Ah, the sweet, uncomplicated innocence of youth. He smiled and thought wistfully of another face, a child he once saw but never knew. Was it Spain? Perhaps Puerto Rico. He had taken her picture as she peeked over the wooden railing of a second floor porch. He could see her eyes again, so solemn as they watched him approach and cross under the overhang of the porch. Her eyes followed him. They had haunted him then, and they haunted him still, though he never could say why. The picture was somewhere in the boxes at the house, and as the memory cleared, he renewed his vow to dig out that picture and have it framed. Though he'd told himself several times he should find it, the task had a sudden urgency that almost turned his feet toward the house to start the search immediately. Silly, he thought; it's just a picture of a child I never knew.

On he walked. In those other places, in that other life, he'd walked because he had to. Now he walked because he chose. He may have left the sea behind, but some compulsions remained.

His destination today was the park. It was a small park, would it be deserted? It seemed almost forgotten when he first found it. It was neatly maintained, the grass clipped, the ball diamond raked and lined. Still, he never saw anyone else there. What a waste. And so very unlike that park in Chile. He had ended up there by accident. A happy accident, too. There were a lot of people there; he could hear the babble of Spanish so incomprehensible, the words all ran together like one long word broken by a few syllables. It was sunny, like today; and like today there was a soft breeze blowing. There had been a child there, too. She was selling roses. He could smell their fragrance all over again.

She had wanted him to buy a flower; he resisted. What would he do with a flower? Still, something in her smile compelled him. With an answering smile he handed over a few pesos, more than necessary he was sure, and walked away with the flower. But what now? He couldn't very well carry a flower back to the ship. Walking back toward the pier, he met a woman in the middle of a crosswalk. She was looking down; it took him three tries to get her attention. When he did, she looked quite cross. He smiled, handed her the flower with a slight nod, and walked away. Reaching the other side of the street, he looked back to see her smiling back, the flower held just below her nose, a flush rising in her cheeks. His heart ached with love for her then, and aches again now at the memory.

Encounters so brief they could be contained in a single memory like a snapshot. Encounters that carried such weight that sometimes he feared he couldn't carry the burden of memory any longer.

Shaking his head, he yanked himself back to the present. He walked toward the woods at the edge of the park. *What am I doing here? Why did I ever come back?* The past was so much more alluring. He fit there. He had tried to fit here. Accepting his brother's offer, not feeling like he had much choice, he'd come back. He had attended the inevitable "Welcome Home" party. Most of the people there, he hadn't recognized them anymore than they'd recognized him. Everyone was excited that he was back, and had asked questions about his time in the service. And no one had comprehended a word he said. The places that he spoke of, they existed only in the pages of National Geographic for these people. The depth of their prejudice for peoples and places they'd never known shocked him. Their inability to grasp the romance of the sea and the places it could take you appalled him.

He had tried, over a couple of beers, to tell Dan about buying the rose and the young woman he'd given it to. He knew he couldn't do justice to the telling of the story, but he tried anyway. Dan's only response had been, "So, did you get laid?"

That seemed to be everything with Dan. He'd gotten a job in selling steel, and through as much luck as hard work, had made a name for himself. He was now the number two man at the firm, looking to be number one. It seemed that if he couldn't own it, eat it or screw it, he had no use for it. The Sailor thought of him as romantically and morally bankrupt.

He wanted to leave, but what he'd told Billy about family was true, more than true. Family is the ties that bind, someone once told him. His family ties felt more like a noose. He tried to fit in. He attended birthdays, only to be reminded of the birthdays he'd missed. Nobody ever said anything outright; that would have been rude. Still, it was there. Someone would start to say something like: "Remember Martha's birthday, when we gave her that cockateel and the cat nearly ate before we even sang 'Happy Birthday'?" He would sit there, not in on the joke,

and someone would explain it to him in a tone normally reserved for the mentally deficient. This would be followed by an uncomfortable silence.

Once he'd mentioned to Dan that he might be able to get a job down by the Gulf Coast. "Look," he said, "it's only about six hours away. It's not like I would be that far."

"I suppose it would involve boats and going out on the ocean," replied Dan coldly.

"As a matter of fact, yes, it would."

"Hey bro," cried Dan, "aren't you a little old to be playing sailor? Who do you think you are, Popeye? You need to stay your happy ass here, that's what you need to do. The holidays are coming, and I don't want to get a phone call from some island hearing that your boat sank and you aren't making it home. You missed enough holidays as it is."

That much Dan had made abundantly clear in the few letters the Sailor had received while he at sea. Never a "Hi, how's going?" or anything remotely similar. Just the same tired litany: When are you coming home?

The truth was, the Sailor did feel a vague but strong guilt over missing holidays. Growing up, holidays were for families. Some of his shipmates had families close by, and they would have big get-togethers for Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas, etc. Those few times the Sailor wasn't at sea for a holiday, he usually spent them alone.

He wanted to walk away, to pack up a few things in a seabag, lock the house, drop the keys in the mail addressed to his brother and head for Key West, Norfolk, San Diego, or any of hundreds of seaports along either coast. Yet his brother had trapped him with not only the house; he'd unknowingly trapped the Sailor by his own guilt and sense of duty. He'd never walked away from his duty before, and he knew he couldn't now. Not and face himself in the mirror every morning. Still, there had to be a way out. The course his life was steering felt wrong,

totally wrong. His happy memories lost for moment, these were the thoughts that consumed him as he started back to the house.

He stood on the edge of the pier, shoulders slumped under the burdens of memory and responsibility. He stood thinking of the sea. Mother Ocean was at once family and lover; his true brothers were his shipmates. That was his real family, not these strangers who called him brother, called him son. The person they sought had been lost at sea, the same place he'd found himself.

He looked at the Great River. The River was heading for the sea, and for that he envied the River. Life was on the sea; the sea abounded with it. This place was death; slow death, meaningless death. He envied the River and its destination.

Still, maybe the River could help. Would the River take him home? His eyes cleared. For the first time since coming to this place, he looked more like himself: proud, resolute, a leader of men. He squared his shoulders and snapped to attention. Now that he knew what he had to do, the doing was much easier. He was on familiar ground.

Smartly, as he had been taught and as he had taught countless others, he executed a right face and saluted the flag on the stern of the ship only his eyes saw. There was pride in his bearing; this was the flag he served so proudly. Dropping the salute, he executed a sharp left face and stood facing the River. His eyes were locked in place, tightly focused to the front and slightly up, as it should be. He led off with his left foot, and taking a standard 30 inch pace, stepped off the pier and into the River.

And the River took him home.